

## In the Fold

Wayne Waibel – 04/21/2024

In the church calendar, this has become known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” It is the fourth Sunday of Easter. While we are currently in an Easter frame of mind – there are a few lilies left – the liturgical colors remain white; it is fitting that we celebrate Christ, the Good Shepherd.

We’ve talked before about the utterly thankless and dangerous role the shepherd plays in the life of the flock. We even break out the twenty-third Psalm to help illuminate the event. It’s no coincidence that the birth of our Lord was announced first to the shepherds who were tending to their flock by night.

There is a strong emphasis - this Sunday in particular - on the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. No one takes it – He freely gives it.

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Sheep are lost without the constant, vigilant care of their shepherd. They have been handed the reputation of being the dumbest of animals, but to be fair, that rep was generated for the most part by cattlemen.

You can drive a herd of cattle, but if you stand behind a flock of sheep and attempt to get them moving by hollering and carrying on, all you'll get them to do is run around to get behind you. Cows can be pushed – sheep need to be led.

And Christ leads by example. His good shepherd illustration in today's gospel from John is delivered to the Sanhedrin – the rulers – they are the ones most in need of this understanding. Believing in Christ means believing that Christ saves us by making us like Himself.

His flock knows Him. We are well aware of the example He sets – the course He lays out for us. We invest our lives into other people's lives. That is the way of Christian discipleship. He is not telling us anything we don't already know. The ruling elite in the time of Christ, were the ones in need of schooling.

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The divisiveness that plagues both society and the church is contrary to the divine call. The call to oneness in the name of Christ. There are many who have not yet come to the knowledge of Christ and therefore have not taken their place in the beloved community. And Jesus is very specific about this – He wants them all in the fold.

What gets in the way of that relationship between the Good Shepherd and His flock is all too often - those upon whom we bestow great power. It's not as though we are blameless in this entanglement, but it's not entirely our fault either.

We as humans become complicit with our own oppression when we are ignorant and afraid of the power of worldly rulers and their empires. The good news is that more and more of us are coming to understand that displays of power and coercion are what rulers do when they don't know what else to do.

If God has made the crucified, risen, ascended, and empowered Jesus both Lord and Messiah, then all Pharaohs, Caesars, and the gods we human beings construct are exposed as pretenders – hirelings – they don't care about the flock except as it concerns their personal agendas.

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"By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us." The Lord is my shepherd – semi-colon – I shall not want. It's not the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want like we recite it. It's the Lord is my shepherd; therefore - I lack nothing.

This community of faith is complete – whole – protected – saved – cherished. Christ's inauguration of God's kingdom continues undeterred, no matter who or what might stand in the way of it. When believers are uncertain of their standing before God, it is God's greatness and not their own goodness that gives them confidence.

The early Christian movement was an outbreak of the Holy Spirit. A simple fisherman who himself denied His Master not once, but three times, was now speaking truth to power.

And his performance was so successful that the movement Jesus started was gaining momentum at such a rate that the reigning powers were scrambling to snuff it out. But their efforts were doomed from the outset.

Believing in and loving Jesus Christ leads to an outward-turning orientation that in turn leads to social justice. Once that process began, lo these many centuries ago – the worldly powers and their hold on the masses began to erode. It's a lengthy process by our standards. For God – it's the blink of an eye.

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The Good Shepherd is a powerful image for us, and rightly so. Of all the “I am” statements in scripture, this is perhaps the most relatable. Certainly, to the growing church in first century Palestine, but in today’s world as well – we too can embrace the imagery.

Many of the classic renderings of Christ in art focus on the shepherd component. It bespeaks a relationship of intimacy that at once defines and commands. The ability to act on God’s word comes from knowing God’s word, both on the page and in the flesh.

The Christian life is a life laid down for others. The spiritual life and obedience, feed and feed one another. One way to resist evil in the world is by not letting inner doubts prevail. Those of us in the fold are well advised to keep things simple. “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.”

Shepherds are hard men. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The Greek word for good is also translated as model. Jesus embodies those qualities we aspire to. So, it falls on us to emulate our Lord.

Proud hearts occasionally need humbling, but much more often – humble hearts need lifting. Jesus has done all the heavy lifting. It’s time for us to step up, that others may see our good work, and glorify our Father which is in heaven. Amen.